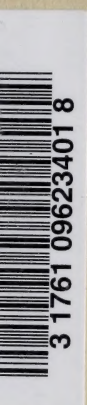


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American Christianity

or

The Church of the Spirit

That is Now Forming

BY

REV. THOMAS VAN NESS
iii

Second Church in Boston

Founded in 1649 A.D.

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AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY.

THE CHURCH OF THE SPIRIT THAT IS NOW FORMING.

"God is Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth."—*Jesus*.

SOONER or later any religious system is bound to be influenced and modified by the characteristics, the temperament, of the people who accept that system. Mohammedanism in India is a different faith from what it is in Arabia, and the Buddhism of China is scarcely to be recognized as the Buddhism of Ceylon. We speak of Europe as Christian, yet the Christianity of Russia is widely at variance with the Protestantism of Holland and each in turn differs from the Catholic form prevalent in Mexico and Peru.

Christianity in the United States was bound in time to reflect the temperament of the American people. Why it has not, as yet, done so to any wide extent is simply because there has been no American people, no sharply differentiated type easily distinguishable from English, Irish, or German.

Since the Civil War it may be said that as a nation we have been coming to self-consciousness; we have been developing certain American characteristics which now fairly well distinguish us from other people.

The first of these is our practicalness. When a plan or project is brought to the attention of an American the question which almost spontaneously springs to his lips is, "What's the good of it?" "What use can be made of it?" In the business world the demand is for service. We hear upon the street that such a railway does not render good service, that the service of another is first class. Why should not a religious system, says the ordinary man, be subjected to the same test, not "is it good," but "is it good for something."

The second noticeable characteristic of the average American is his absorption in the present. Today counts, not next week, not next year. The newspaper is the symbol of this characteristic. It must be up-to-date. It may print articles of value upon the early history of commerce but these articles are rarely read. What is the news of today? That is the question asked by all ranks and classes.

The third American characteristic is the demand for that which can be easily understood and which is capable of being arranged in an orderly and business-like fashion.

The fourth characteristic is the strong preference shown for whatever appeals to personal experience, or what can be tested by a man's own knowledge. The self-reliance of the American springs largely from this mental quality.

Sooner or later the Christian systems, inherited from Europe, were certain to be modified by these characteristics. From time to time attempts have been made in that direction, as witness the popularity of the Campbellite or Disciples of Christ denomination (the two simple requirements of

which are baptism and belief that the Bible contains the word of God), or remember the Spiritualistic movement and the various ethical culture societies.

These are indications of the direction in which Christianity must move in order to meet the needs of the average American mind.

Some seventy-five years ago the prevailing Calvinistic theology laid great stress upon the future and the past. It dwelt upon heaven and hell, the sin of Adam and the fall of man. Its hymns were full of the sentiment that earth was merely a probationary place. "I'm a pilgrim and a stranger," was a favorite hymn; so, too, the one beginning "I'm going home to die no more." The Calvinistic system was not easily understood by the lay mind; it was intricate and expressed in terms capable of different meanings: grace and free will; foreordination and predestination; original sin and vicarious atonement; the eternal decrees and the sovereignty of God; the elect and the non-elect. These theological terms suggested subjects upon which men could talk and argue by the hour, as they did, and finally come to no conclusion of any practical value to this present life.

Channing and his fellow-workers voiced the growing discontent with Calvinism; more, they attempted to reconstruct the prevailing theology along the lines of simplicity and practicalness. To do so they went back to the plain and easily understood words of Jesus and upon them they laid the emphasis. In the preaching of Channing there is the continual insistence upon the value and dignity of human nature. "You and I and

all men children of God; you and I and all men bound together in one world family with the duties and privileges of sons of God."

Such preaching produced practical results. It is not too much to say that nearly every philanthropic organization of any force or value in or near Boston owes its inception to the men and women who came under Channing's influence. Take three illustrations: scientific charity dates from Tuckerman; the first systematic care of the insane was inaugurated by Dorothea Dix; the first intelligent and scientific treatment of the blind and feeble-minded was that of Dr. Howe. These three workers were intimate friends of William Ellery Channing and felt the spell of his deep enthusiasm and fervid preaching. Unfortunately for the new "Unitarian movement," as it came to be called, the popular cry was soon raised against it of infidelity. "It makes of the Savior a mere man," was said over and over again; "it denies the inspiration of the Bible;" "it repudiates the sacred doctrine of the Trinity;" "it is guilty of the unpardonable sin against the Holy Ghost."

Hundreds and hundreds of timid people were greatly influenced by this cry and even the Unitarians themselves were startled and dismayed by its vehemence and by the assertion of Orthodox divines that the success of Channing's movement meant the utter destruction of Christianity.

Unitarianism had to defend itself; it had to seek reasons for its position and thus its attention was diverted from the practical to the intellectual.

Theodore Parker represents the halfway position of Unitarianism. On the one hand he champions

all the great reforms of his time; on the other hand his sermons are filled with denials and rebuttals; with reasons for or against certain texts, or with arguments to disprove orthodox doctrines. After Parker came the preachers who lived in what I may call the scientific age—the period of Darwin, Huxley, and Spencer. These Unitarian preachers are so absorbed with the magnitude of the scientific revelation that their sermons take on the characteristics of lectures, and their pulpits are turned into professors' desks, from which one may hear the latest scientific nomenclature, of survival of the fittest; differentiation of species; products of evolution; Lamarkian factors; sociological development, as fifty years before men heard from Orthodox pulpits the special ecclesiastical terms of Calvinism.

Unitarianism seemed to be on a side track—to have wandered off the roadway of progress and to have become merely academic and theoretical. Yes, it is true, no strong note of affirmation was struck; no definite gospel preached; nothing said, sung, nor done that might directly appeal to the plain good sense and strong emotions of the average man. Stop! What did I say? Nothing done? Yes, much was done though not directly done under church auspices. The initial impulse of Unitarianism towards charity and philanthropy never died out, never lost its strong impelling power, only—and here is the misfortune so far as the Unitarian denomination is concerned—only it became secular, civic, disassociated from the church, and therefore apparently from church influences.

As we look back upon the last quarter of the nineteenth century it seems to hold within it very little of permanent value to religion and yet it was a most necessary period like that introduced once in Judea nineteen hundred years ago when the central figure was John the Baptist. There was little that was spiritual in John's denunciatory message but much that was emancipatory. Those who accepted John as a leader found release from the stern and narrow formalism of the Jewish law. Freedom alone is no great boon, but freedom is an absolute prerequisite before any great results can be accomplished.

So the scientific essayists and intellectual Unitarian preachers and even the secularists of a former period were all needful. Yes, in his way Mr. Ingersoll was a great religious emancipator. At times, in a coarse but nevertheless effective fashion, he did help to prepare the way of the Lord—to make His paths straight.

The new crystallization now going on along the line of spiritual verities would have been impossible if first of all there had not been a season of controversy, of definition, and of "break up;" a period when exact and scientific truth was promulgated.

I said a little while ago that the Campbellite denomination, the ethical culture societies, and the spiritualistic movement were indications of the direction in which Christianity must move in order to meet the wants of the average American mind.

Now the simplicity of doctrinal statement upon which the Campbellites pride themselves is certainly matched by Unitarianism today. Since the

Saratoga Conference of 1894 the Bond of Union has been: "These churches accept the religion of Jesus holding in accordance with his teaching that practical religion is summed up in love to God and love to man."

Equally simple and easily understood are the five points of faith:

The Fatherhood of God,
The Brotherhood of Man,
The Leadership of Jesus,
Salvation by Character,

The Progress of Mankind onward and upward forever.

Surely no statement embodying great and universal truths can be put in language more free from theological bias or traditional usage. In the same creedless way the church covenant reads: "In the love of truth and the spirit of Jesus Christ we unite for the worship of God and the service of man." In that phrase, "the service of man," there is involved the practical duty of helping each one his neighbor, upon which the ethical culturists so strongly insist.

Unitarianism, then, in two particulars at least does not run counter to, but in harmony with, the dominant American characteristics. It is, first of all, simple and easily grasped, *i.e.*, it is *direct*; it is intelligible and free from all ambiguous or vague phrases.

Secondly. It is *practical*. It lays stress upon usefulness:— service for the community, for the State, for all mankind. Its chief end is to promote the ideal commonwealth, called in Christian language "the kingdom of God."

Where it has failed is along the line of spirituality, of worship. It has called men's attention to the need of truth, passionately insisting upon their knowing the truth as of primary importance. With almost equal insistence, at times, has it called upon men to do, and to give; to engage in all useful and philanthropic activities, but it has not, in any strong or deep way, called men to fall upon bended knee, to raise their voices in prayer and praise, to give expression to the feeling of worship.

Its services, judged by the standard of the liturgical churches, are cold and bare. They lack in ceremonial dignity; above all, the absence of any accredited order of prayer, or of any authoritative book of worship betokens it is said a poverty which is most lamentable. Because of this bareness in its spiritual exercises and this lack of a book of worship, critics have been too prone to speak of Unitarian services as cold and wanting in proper religious warmth and color. It has not been seen by these critics, perhaps it has not altogether been seen by the Unitarians themselves, that, very largely, the traditional supports had first of all to be swept away before anything better and grander and nobler could be introduced. Certainly it has not been appreciated by these critics that if God is to be worshipped in spirit and in truth, then the utterances upon the lips must be those actually believed, not words, phrases, creeds, understood in one sense by the rector or minister, and in quite a different sense by the people. Such double meaning is bound to create an atmosphere of insincerity in which the true spiritual worship cannot long survive.

The forms of worship that are needed must be of such a kind as can be joined in heartily by all sorts and conditions of mankind. America is a land of no one sect, of no one race, of no one people.

The fundamental law of our land recognizes this fact. It says, in effect, to every foreigner landing upon our shores who desires to make the United States his future home, "forget the fact that you are Irish, German, Norwegian; forget the battle of the Boyne, with its bitter associations; forget the victory of Sedan; forget that in the old land you were peasant, or landowner, 'in trade,' or of the bureaucracy, and remember only that in this new land you are equal in the eyes of the law, and each entitled to the sovereignty of the ballot, hereafter you are all to be known by the one title—American."

The liturgy that is needed by the true American Church is one which shall breathe through every line and phrase the same spirit of catholicity and inclusiveness, one which shall make men forget that in the old land they were Lutheran, Presbyterian, Orthodox Greek, and bring to their hearts and minds the realization that they are all children of God, and therefore members of the same world family.

Now, what Church, what organization today is in so favorable a position as is the Unitarian to develop just such a liturgy? Reverent it must be and very largely phrased in the hallowed words of the Bible, breathing too the sentiment of universal brotherhood and the unity of human life. Used by all sorts and conditions of people, it will help to promote that peaceful, kindly spirit which

the State seeks to further through its national anniversaries and patriotic occasions.

* * * * *

The seemingly unproductive scientific period through which Unitarianism passed was of value in more ways than one. It showed us very thoroughly that a new set of virtues was needed in this age to supplement those formerly so insisted upon. These new virtues are:

Impartiality.

Open mindedness.

Clear sightedness.

Broadness of sympathy.

Tolerance.

These virtues the average man does not yet fully appreciate. As a nation we are not especially tolerant, nor have we that broadness of sympathy which sees the best in the Chinaman, the Negro, the Filipino, or even the poor Italian. It is therefore the duty of Unitarianism to say to one and all "ye must be born again into a sweet reasonableness."

Warmth at the heart is most commendable, but what is especially needed is not so much emotional fervor, as correct thinking; clear sightedness. Society today is a complex and delicate organism, it is not enough for me to wish to do right, I must also know how to do right, otherwise my kind intentions may work as much harm for my neighbor as good.

Here again is where Unitarianism is fitted to take leadership. In a large and catholic spirit it can examine modern problems and without heat, passion and prejudice discuss them in such a way

as will help to eliminate petty prejudices or inherited notions.

The Church of the Spirit is being born in America.

It will embody the teachings and principles of Jesus as has no other Church in all the past.

1st. It will place the emphasis upon the present the now and here, as did the Master, striving to build up the kingdom of God in America.

2nd. It will place its emphasis primarily upon right thinking. As the New Thought movement so strongly urges, it will say to every man, "what you think you will tend to become. Watch over your thoughts; guard against evil suggestions, thus only can you have health of mind and health of body."

3rd. It will place its emphasis upon right acts, not simply to one's family, to one's neighbors, to one's countrymen, but to the least as well as the greatest—insisting with a new force upon the relationship which exists between all men; insisting even more that only thus can the will of God be done. "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my father who is in heaven." "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

The hopefulness of our Unitarian position is that we are now moving along these three lines, lines of tendency in harmony with the characteristics and the temperament of the American people.

There is one direction in which we are peculiarly well fitted to lead, although at present our efforts seem hardly bent towards doing so. We

are fitted to lead along the lines of spiritual worship.

“In the spirit of Jesus for the worship of God.” So reads part of our covenant. “In the spirit of Jesus.” Yes! he relied on no mere forms, or ceremonies; Jesus himself did not gain his strength from any leaning upon or looking upon a Savior or Redeemer. He drew his strength and inspiration directly from the fountain head. He went in prayer into the presence of the Father, spirit communing with spirit, and from that contact received power.

“Ye shall be endowed with power from on high.”

The power waits for our acceptance.

Through the worship “in spirit and in truth,” we shall gain that heavenly power which shall make us as very sons and daughters of God.

Oh! then, my friends, rejoice that you and I are given a share in the building up of this Church of the Spirit; let us, in perfect trust, yield ourselves up to the leadings of the Comforter, the light which shall guide, the perfect life.

Faithful is He who is calling you and me and all men by His Spirit.

His promises of old are faithfulness and truth.

Forgetting the things that are behind, let us reach forward with gladness unto the things that are before, and one and all in obedient service press onward toward the mark of the heavenly calling of God.

